Nonfamiliarity and indefinite descriptions

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1. Introduction

Grice introduced generalized conversational implicatures with the following example: “Anyone who uses a sentence of the form *X is meeting a woman this evening* would normally implicate that the person to be met was someone other than X’s wife, mother, sister, or perhaps even close platonic friend” (1975: 37). Concerning this example, he suggested the following account:

When someone, by using the form of expression *an X*, implicates that the X does not belong to or is not otherwise closely connected with some identifiable person, the implicature is present because the speaker has failed to be specific in a way in which he might have been expected to be specific.... (Grice 1975: 38.)

Grice went on to sketch an explanation as to why such an implicature should arise, involving the different ways in which we behave towards things that are closely related to us.

In “Referring expressions and conversational implicature”, Andrew Kehler and Gregory Ward (2006; henceforth KW) discuss a set of implicatures which might be seen as a subgroup of those which Grice pointed out. KW call these NONFAMILIARITY IMPLICATURES, and characterize them as cases in which “a speaker’s failure to use a referring expression that indicates hearer-familiarity conversationally implicates that the referent is in fact nonfamiliar to the hearer” (KW 177). KW’s implicature might be thought to replace or subsume the scalar implicature of NONUNIQUENESS postulated by Hawkins (1991). The main purpose of this paper is to argue that this is not the case. In §2 below we look a bit more closely at KW’s nonfamiliarity implicature, including some cases in which it does not arise. §3 addresses the main point of the paper, which is the relation between KW’s nonfamiliarity implicature and Hawkins’ nonuniqueness implicature. In §4 we look at an issue which arises in §3 – when does a definite description convey familiarity? The final section contains some concluding remarks.

2. KW’s nonfamiliarity implicature

We start by noting that familiarity is a more complicated concept than it might at first appear to be. KW (183) cite a criterion from Gundel et al. (1993: 278):

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1 This is a slightly revised version of a paper which we presented at the annual LSA meeting, Pittsburgh, January 2011. Andy Kehler and Carol Slater had provided us with many detailed and helpful comments which much improved the contents of that paper. We would also like to thank Karen Lewis, Rebecca Passonneau, Ken Taylor, and the audience at the LSA, especially David Beaver, Craige Roberts and Gregory Ward, for their helpful comments. We dedicate this paper to the fond memory of Ellen Prince.

2 KW also consider at some length the relation between their implicature and some implicatures proposed by Gundel, Hedberg & Zacharski (1993). We will not be concerned here with that portion of their paper.
FAMILIAR: The addressee is able to uniquely identify the intended referent because he already has a representation of it in memory....

This conception of familiarity suggests that the addressee is able to identify an entity being spoken of on the basis of the NP used, and it might present a problem for KW because of examples like those in (1) below.

(1) a. Someone you know well called me yesterday.
   b. I met a good friend of yours at the bookstore.
   c. One of your teachers will know the answer to that.

The underlined NPs in (1) are examples from Prince’s category of ANCHORED indefinites (Prince 1981: 236), which introduce discourse-new entities that are related to discourse-old entities in some way. The examples in (1) introduce entities which are related to the addressee, and obviously would not give rise to a nonfamiliarity implicature, even though the NPs in question would not meet the Gundel et al. criterion for familiarity (assuming that the criterion does indeed imply recognition on the basis of the NP used). Let us instead assume an everyday nonlinguistic notion of familiarity, which does not imply anything about the linguistic content of an NP.

With this simplification in hand, we next want to make it clear that we do not deny the existence of an implicature of the type proposed by KW. There are obviously cases where use of an indefinite NP, for example, would strongly convey that the entity alluded to is not one that is familiar to the addressee, as shown below.

(2) Dr. Montgomery: “Mr. Schwartz, do you understand that Georgie [his wife, comatose for two years] is pregnant because someone went into her room and impregnated her?”
   Mr. Schwartz: “Not someone, Dr. Montgomery. It was me.”
   [from “Private Practice”, a night-time ABC medical soap]

(3) a. Ominously, he asked Mousavi, “I can speak tonight about a woman, someone you know, someone who has been at your side often these past days....” [The Washington Note, “Guest Post: Dispatches from Tehran”, 6/15/09]
   b. In fact, I have a cousin who's a man, maybe you know him. [Scott C. Sickles, Erroneous Zones, Scene 3, line 3]

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3 For more discussion of familiarity, cf., e.g., Prince 1992 on “hearer-old” NPs, and Roberts 2003 on weak vs. strong familiarity.
4 It is not clear that indefinite NPs can properly be said to refer, although many linguists speak as though they can. (See, e.g., Kamp 1981, Fodor & Sag 1982, Heim 1982, Ludlow & Neale 1991, and Abbott 2010: Ch. 12 for discussion.) Kent Bach (2006: 532f) suggests allude as a suitable verb for the relation between indefinite NPs and the entities which inspire their specific use and, in the typical case, help to make containing declarative utterances true.
The examples above show not only cancellation of a familiarity implicature, but also suspension and reinforcement – three hallmarks of conversational implicature.

It is undoubtedly the case that use of an indefinite NP will frequently implicate an assumption that the addressee is not familiar with an entity being spoken of. However, we turn now to cases in which the KW implicature does not arise. We know of at least four kinds of such cases. The first comprises “arch” uses, as in (4).

(4) **Someone** got up on the wrong side of the bed!

The most likely entity being alluded to in an utterance like (4) is the addressee him- or herself!

The second kind of case where an indefinite does not give rise to the KW implicature is illustrated in (5) and (6).

(5) a. All in all, it was a long and trying day for a team that had grown used to making life miserable for the opposition. [From a news story about Traverse City St. Francis’s basketball team.]
   b. ...he saw a team start out hot (7-0) and then he saw a team relax,.... [Danny Ainge describing the Celtics, in the Boston Globe online edition, 11/17/05]

(6) a. A student walked into Sue’s office and asked her about his exam. Finally, a student needed her help!
   b. I went to see Star Trek on Sunday. That’s pretty much all I did all weekend: I saw a movie.
   c. We have this nail here. Unfortunately, now we have a nail and no hammer.
   d. I went out to dinner with the woman from the bar last night. Can you believe it – a woman went out to dinner with me!

[From Lewis 2010: exx. 6-9]

Karen Lewis calls the underlined occurrences in (6) **SUMMARY USES**, in which an indefinite is used to allude to an entity which has already been introduced into the discourse. Here, as Lewis notes, it would be incoherent to view the underlined NPs as introducing new entities to the discourse, and this overrides any nonfamiliarity implicature.

A third kind of case (possibly related to the preceding) is illustrated in the monolog in (7) (from Passonneau 1994, (1)-(6)).

(7) My neighbor Mary needed some of my garden tools. I left the hoe out on the lawn for her to borrow. Before she had a chance to get it, my husband came home. He saw a hoe out on our lawn. He put it in the garage. Unfortunately it was the hoe I’d left out, so Mary was out of luck.

In this monolog the hoe which is mentioned with the underlined indefinite *a hoe* turns out to be the same as the one being talked about in the preceding sentences. Rebecca
Passonneau dubs the phenomenon illustrated here frame shift. Use of the indefinite is possible in this case because the speaker is taking the point of view of her husband.

Finally, there are many ordinary cases when the identity of an entity alluded to is simply not relevant to the topic at hand. So consider example (8), under the assumption that both A and B are familiar with all of the finalists for some position.

(8)  
A: Did any of the finalists need directions?  
B: Two of them did – the others were fine.

Here the question only concerns the existence of finalists needing directions. Their identity is not relevant. And the NP two of them in B’s response, while not being one which would normally indicate hearer-familiarity, nevertheless does not implicate that the addressee is not familiar with these individuals (which would be false in the assumed context). Some additional examples are given in (9):

(9)  
a. I spoke with several members of the board yesterday.  
b. I’ve seen three movies in the past week!  
c. I’m sorry I’m late – a grad student came to see me at the last minute.

For any of these examples it might easily be the case that the speaker is aware that the addressee is acquainted with the entities being spoken of. Their identity is just not relevant, however, so no nonfamiliarity implicature is drawn. (Cf. also the discussion in Passoneau 1994.)

Our conclusion is that the KW implicature needs a qualification about expectations similar to that indicated by Grice – “the implicature is present because the speaker has failed to be specific in a way in which he might have been expected to be specific” (Grice 1975: 38).

3. Nonfamiliarity vs. nonuniqueness

We turn now to the main point of our paper. We want to consider what the implications of the KW implicature are for the scalar implicature of nonuniqueness proposed by Hawkins (1991) (and others following him, e.g. Gundel et al. 2001, Horn 2007, Abbott 2010, Horn & Abbott to appear). Hawkins’ implicature is derived from the fact that the definite and indefinite article form the “Horn scale” <the, a>. The and a are in paradigmatic opposition, with the resulting in stronger propositions; thus use of a conveys that the corresponding sentence with the is not appropriate – that the descriptive content of the NP is not satisfied uniquely (in context). This scalar implicature is illustrated in the examples below (= KW’s (13), minus the internet sources).

(10) a. Over the nineteenth century, Britain became a, if not the, world power.

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3 Hawkins and others speak in terms of unilateral entailment but there are difficulties with this aspect of his theory. These are dealt with at length in Horn & Abbott (to appear). We note as well some issues that have arisen following Heim’s (1991) suggestion of a principle “Maximize Presupposition”, said to be not reducible to the theory of scalar implicatures. (Cf., e.g., Magri 2009, Singh 2009, and the works cited there.) We hope to discuss these issues in future work.
b. Decision making is a, but not the, fundamental construct in design.

c. I find it humbling that the Torah, uniquely in the religious literature of mankind, begins by setting out these themes – insisting that parenting is not only a, but the supreme religious act.

In (10a) the implicature of nonuniqueness is suspended, in (10b) it is reinforced, and in (10c) it is cancelled.

KW seem at times to be claiming that their nonfamiliarity implicature supplants Hawkins’ implicature – that the latter does not exist, as such. Thus the abstract of their paper states that the Hawkins analysis makes “predictions that are not borne out. **Instead,** the observed pattern reflects the existence of **NONFAMILIARITY IMPLICATURES....**” (KW: 177; small caps in original, boldface added). And later they say that Hawkins’ analysis predicts implicatures for “only a subset” of the cases analyzed by KW (191). On the other hand, and somewhat inconsistently, they do acknowledge the correctness of the Hawkins’ analysis for the examples in (10), which are not predicted by KW – the examples in (10) have nothing to do with addressee familiarity. (Cf. Horn & Abbott (to appear) for elaboration of this point, with an inventory of further related examples.) So one should definitely not conclude that the Hawkins implicature does not exist, or that it is supplanted by a nonfamiliarity implicature.

Let us look now at the main examples that form KW’s case against Hawkins. The first of these is given in (11) below (KW’s (2) & (4); Hawkins’ (12)).

(11) I met a student before class. A student came to see me after class as well – in fact it was the same student I had seen before.

The second occurrence of a student here does indeed convey that the individual alluded to is novel. And this is a case where a could alternate with the.

(12) I met a student before class. The student came to see me after class as well.

In Hawkins’ view, the is required here because the student in question is unique in the given context. In this case, uniqueness in context is tantamount to familiarity, so the choice of a which conveys nonuniqueness also conveys nonfamiliarity.

KW cite two other kinds of examples as problematic for Hawkins. One is where familiarity varies, but not uniqueness, as in (13) (KW’s (16), with underlining added).

(13) A: Has John read any good books lately?
B: Yes, the book that John is currently reading – in fact the one I showed you yesterday when we were at the bookstore – is reportedly a real page-turner.

Since this is a contrast in descriptonal content and not determiner choice, it does not really present a problem for a scalar implicature involving the and a.

A more serious problem appears to be presented by the other example KW give against Hawkins, where they say uniqueness varies, but not familiarity.
KW point out that this example is anomalous under the assumption that the addressee doesn’t know about the student that the speaker met with three days ago. In that case, according to KW, we have an attempted cancellation of nonuniqueness, but not nonfamiliarity.

We have several comments to make in reply. Our first comment is that it is not clear that we even have cancellation of an implicature in these examples. They are of the form \( A, \text{ in fact } B \) (the only form in KW’s examples, with the exception of those in (10) above). But this construction may also be used simply to add more, presumably relevant, information to an utterance. Consider the examples in (15).

\begin{enumerate}
\item Mary is coming for a visit. In fact I got an e-mail from her about it last night.
\item I gave them a number of arguments – five, in fact.
\end{enumerate}

Certainly to say that Mary is coming for a visit does not implicate that I didn’t get an e-mail from her, nor does the NP \emph{a number of arguments} implicate that the actual number is not five. So this construction does not necessarily cancel a conversational implicature – more evidence would be needed to establish that.

Second, assuming for the sake of argument that this is implicature cancellation, we note that acceptable examples can be constructed which are similar to (14), where an indefinite is supplemented with a definite description which does convey unique identifiability and does not convey addressee familiarity. Some examples are in (16).

\begin{enumerate}
\item I met a student before class. A student came to see me after class as well...
\item – in fact it was the student I had least expected.
\item – in fact it was the boyfriend of the first student.
\item – in fact it was just the student I had wanted to talk with.
\end{enumerate}

So it is clear that \emph{in general} there is no problem with varying uniqueness but not familiarity.

That still leaves us with the task of explaining the oddness of (14). We think that it is traceable to the definite description itself, regardless of the purported function of canceling implicatures. So (17) is similarly odd – again, under the assumption that one’s addressee is not acquainted with the student in question.

\begin{enumerate}
\item # The student I met with three days ago came to see me after class.
\end{enumerate}

In other words the anomaly of (14) is not the result of a failure to cancel an implicature of nonfamiliarity associated with the indefinite \emph{a student}, but rather the \emph{stipulated} failure of the context to satisfy an implicature of familiarity associated with the underlined definite description. Why that particular kind of definite description should have such an implicature is something we address in the next section. But whatever that explanation
turns out to be, it should be clear that (14) is not a counterexample to Hawkins’ scalar implicature of nonuniqueness.

4. Explaining the familiarity implication

Our task now is to explain why a definite description like *the student I met with three days ago*, occurring out of the blue, conveys an assumption that the addressee already knows about the existence of the entity referred to. Without such an assumption, it would be much more natural to introduce the student with an indefinite description. (18) is another example.

(18) The man in the kitchen is eating pizza.

Ken Taylor has pointed out to us that something like (18) is only suitable if the speaker assumes their addressee knows about the man already, or can see them. A quasi-naturally occurring example is shown in below in (19), from Sue Grafton’s *U is for Undertow* (p. 91). The context is a phone conversation between a newly introduced character, Walker McNally, and a person named Jon whom Walker has just called and whom the reader has not met previously. Walker is describing a police search in his neighborhood.

(19) “I saw them just now, on my way home from work. I pulled over and chatted with a gal I knew. She said they thought a child was buried on the hill. They dug up the dog.”

Use of the definite description *the dog* here instantly tells the reader that Walker knows that Jon is familiar with the dog in question.

Data like these might incline one towards resuscitating the familiarity theory of definiteness, but there are far too many counterexamples to this approach (cf. e.g., Birner & Ward 1994; Abbott 1999, 2000, 2008; Horn & Abbott to appear). And given that the familiarity theory must be buttressed with accommodation, the familiarity theorist still would have the problem of explaining why accommodation does not occur here.

Some of Hawkins’ comments suggest a more promising approach. He noted that an example like (20) (his (16)) conveys nothing about number.

(20) A movie that Mary was watching last night was really interesting.

Hawkins describes this case as one in which an indefinite is “neutral” with respect to uniqueness: the movie alluded to in (20) could easily have been the only one Mary watched last night, or not. (Cf. Hawkins 1991: 422.) Notice that if we replace the indefinite with a definite description, as in (21)

(21) The movie that Mary was watching last night was really interesting.

we now have a suggestion that the addressee already knows about the movie in question.

We would like to suggest that the occurrences of definite descriptions which implicate addressee familiarity are those which could have been replaced with the
corresponding indefinite description with no implication that there is more than one such entity – that is, where the corresponding indefinite description is uniqueness-neutral. In such a context, to flag an entity as uniquely identifiable instructs the addressee to search for a relevant shared domain within which this entity is unique. Note that if we construct a context in which uniqueness is important, the definite description in (14) and (17) no longer conveys addressee familiarity. This is illustrated in (22).

(22) Please get me more information about the student I met with three days ago.

We need not assume, from the utterance of (22), that the addressee has prior acquaintance with the student in question, but only that they can determine in some way (say from the speaker’s appointment book) who that individual is. Use of the corresponding indefinite here would be infelicitous, as shown in (23).

(23) #Please get me more information about a student I met with three days ago.

This is because it is now relevant whether there is one such student or more than one; the request does not seem sensible if it does not matter which of several students the information is about. If something like this line of explanation is correct, it reinforces the the/a alternation put forward by Hawkins.

5. Conclusion

In this note we have had one main goal. This was to clarify the relation between KW’s conversational implicature of nonfamiliarity and Hawkins’ scalar implicature of nonuniqueness. The latter implicature has indeed been firmly established, and is not challenged by KW’s claims. Note that the two kinds of implicature are very different in nature from each other. Hawkins’ implicature is one of a fairly well-defined group, the scalar implicatures, and it depends on the existence of a small set of natural paradigmatic alternatives. On the other hand the presumed nonfamiliarity implicature is very general. It arises via natural assumptions concerning what kinds of information may be relevant to an addressee, and it is not expression-related in the way that Hawkins’ implicature is. The two kinds of implicature can co-exist – each without casting doubt on the existence of the other. Finally, an unanticipated outcome of our explorations was the discovery of a subset of definite descriptions, occurrences of which seem to come with an assumption of addressee familiarity. We have suggested that this happens when a corresponding indefinite description would have been “uniqueness-neutral” – that is, when the exact number of entities meeting the descriptive content of the NP is not relevant. There is obviously much more to be said on this topic, but we hope to have achieved at least our main goal.

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6 Of course one can make (23) natural by adding factors which would make such a request sensible, e.g. as shown in (i).

(i) Please get me more information about a student – ANY student – I met with three days ago. (I just have to prove I was on campus then, and not on the site of the terrorist act I’ve been charged with.)
References


